

LASCA Leaves



Los Angeles County Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens

VIRGINIA ROBINSON GARDENS

FOR MORE than a half century Virginia Robinson's cherished gardens inspired admiration in anyone fortunate enough to visit them. Zoë Akins, a close friend and Pulitzer

Prize-winning playwright, was moved by the contrasting moods of the gardens in different seasons to record her impressions in a poem later read as a eulogy to Mrs. Robin-

son. The rain Miss Akins described still falls on the terrace and carefully tended plants, but the lady who called for the violins no longer stands watching it.



LuAnn B. Munns

Old oleanders trained as trees frame the guesthouse pavilion, built in 1924.

During her lifetime, Virginia Robinson spread pleasure among her friends with meticulously planned parties in her home and garden. She made equally precise arrangements to ensure that her beloved estate would always remain intact as a botanical garden for the people of Los Angeles County. To accomplish this, in 1974 she deeded the estate and a million dollar endowment fund for its maintenance to the County with the stipulation that it be used as an arboretum or botanic garden.

The mild climate in this particular area of Beverly Hills provides ideal outdoor conditions for the cultivation of tropical and subtropical type plants that the other facilities cannot duplicate. Because of this fact, the garden will serve as a major research center of the Department for the testing and selection of plants. This program, initiated with the founding of the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum in 1948, has led to the introduction of over 80 plants to the landscape of Los Angeles and Southern California.

The Virginia Robinson Gardens Foundation was recently organized to support the newest of the Department's facilities. The Foundation, led by Mrs. Lucy Toberman, president, has offices at the gardens at 1008 Elden Way, Beverly Hills. Incorporated as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization, the Foundation's primary purpose will be to raise funds to support the educational and research activities of the gardens.

Since Mrs. Robinson died in 1977 a few weeks before her 100th birthday, the grounds that once echoed to the sound of her fashionable parties have been silent, maintained by her staff of gardeners and long-time major domo, Ivo Hadjiev, while Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens officials went through the time-consuming process of preparing the grounds for public use. The preliminaries are now almost finished with the first public opening of the Virginia Robinson Gardens scheduled for late 1981. Improvements include paving several foot paths and installing ramps, handrails, restrooms, a small park-



ing lot, and a new fire hydrant.

The 6.2 acre estate surrounds a one-story stucco mansion designed by Mrs. Robinson's father, architect Nathaniel Dryden. Mr. Dryden also designed "El Miradero" in Glen-

LA TERRASSE DANS LA PLUIE

*The long green terrace edging the long gracious house
Between the cypress hedges overlooking the hollow
garden*

*And beyond, the pools, the fountains, the oleanders,
and the pavilion*

Are beautiful in the moonlight

The sounds of the violins

The dancers interweaving

Make life.

Beyond, the caged monkeys and strange birds

And the massed trees

*Look towards the lighted pavilion and the bright
terrace*

Out of the shadows

*But there will be nights when no candlelight and
torches or violins*

Make life on the terrace

*Instead, la pluie sa tombe, sa tombe**

*Washing the green terrace with soft waves
Reaching through the green turf of the hollow gardens
To the root-mat under*

Bringing from leaf and bark of the dark trees

The scent of the earth, of life

And she who will stand a while

Beyond the glass wall of the gracious house

Will open a door and walk on the rain washed terracc

As aware of the thankful roots

*Of the earth scents, and the strong slant of the rain
in the air*

As the sod and the flowering darkness

And be happy —

*Without torch or candle or violins or moonlit
souvenirs*

Because, this too, is life

**the rain falls, falls*

— by Zoë Akins



A bronze crane strides toward the marble terrace of Virginia's Robinson's mansion.

dale, now the Brand Library, for Leslie Brand in 1903.

Mrs. Robinson liked to point out that hers was the first house in Beverly Hills. The area was all open country in 1911 when Mrs. Robinson and her husband, Harry, son of the founder of the Robinson's department stores, returned from their three-year honeymoon to Europe and Kashmir. One evening soon after their return they went searching for the stylish new Los Angeles Country Club. They didn't find the club but they did find for sale a sloping site surrounded by barley fields near what would later become Elden Way.

"Just like that, my husband said 'This is where we're going to live,'" Mrs. Robinson once reminisced to a biographer. "Burton Green had built Beverly Hills. But there wasn't one house here . . . just a little bit of a real estate office, kind of a shed, on Santa Monica Boulevard."

Mr. Dryden designed the Beaux

Arts style mansion for gracious entertaining with large windows facing the marble terrace and a broad lawn indented into the slope behind the house. Mrs. Robinson gave her first party shortly after completion of the residence in the fall of 1913, and she remained one of the most vivacious, popular hostesses in the city for the next 66 years. When Beverly Hills celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1964, the city presented Mrs. Robinson with a plaque naming her "First Lady of Beverly Hills."

In her spacious home Mrs. Robinson lived and entertained in a style seldom seen in this country with a staff of 11 servants catering to an assortment of prominent and amusing visitors. Sir Anthony Eden was a favorite in a guest list that ran the gamut from statesmen to film stars.

Most of the gala events such as her annual party for the Hollywood Bowl Patronesses were held on the

lawn that sweeps 100 yards from the terrace behind the house up around the pool to the guest house pavilion at the top of the slope. Although the mansion and guest house pavilion complement each other, structural details and design complexity make the architecture of the pavilion more significant, according to architectural historian John Chase. A screen of windows topped by fan lights and set slightly behind Tuscan columns typify the Palladian and 18th century French styles that influenced William Richards when he designed the pavilion in 1924. The sliding windows flood the interior with sunlight and, along with the lattice-covered mirrors at opposite ends of the room, give the room the appearance of an airy gazebo.

The other main room on the lower level is a game room where Mrs. Robinson played billiards with her guests. A small spiral stairway leads to the second floor card room where she often exercised her formidable bridge playing skills with Fred Astaire and other close friends.

All the rooms and garden terraces were planned on a human scale for enjoyment by visitors, not as intimidating monuments to Mrs. Robinson's considerable wealth. Consequently, although individual features may be unremarkable in themselves, they combine to create an atmosphere of irresistible charm. Their timeless elegance will still be apparent to visitors in the years to come because Mrs. Robinson kept the buildings and gardens unaltered, such a perfectly preserved symbol of Beverly Hills' glamorous past that the estate is now included in the National Register of Historic Places.

Story and photos by LuAnn B. Munns, editor of LASCA Leaves.

NEW LAS VOLUNTARIAS OFFICERS

CAROL (MRS GARY) OVERTURF was installed as president at the June meeting of Las Voluntarias y Los Ayudantes.

Mrs. Overturf joined the California Foundation in 1970 soon after she and her husband, Gary, and

that and immediately fell in love with the Queen Anne Cottage."

Her enthusiasm for all facets of the Arboretum led Mrs. Overturf to take the field leader training and later guide adult walking tours. She has also worked on almost every Las Voluntarias committee. She has been program chairman, Baldwin Bonanza chairman, a consultant in the botanical information center, and, when she was second vice-president, coordinator of volunteers.

Other members of the 1981-82 executive board installed at the June meeting were Jo (Mrs. Herbert) Iske, first vice-president; Virginia (Mrs. C. A.) Stein, second vice-president; and Joyce McSweeny, secretary.

FIESTA DE FLORES

EACH YEAR for the past 18 years the benefit plant sale at South Coast Botanic Garden has been growing steadily larger and more profitable. The 1981 Fiesta de Flores

on May 16 and 17 not only followed the pattern but showed an almost one-third increase over 1980 with gross sales of about \$50,000 during the sale and preview party.

Cindy (Mrs. Richard) Peters, Fiesta chairman, attributed success of the sale to an increased awareness in the community of what the South Coast Botanic Garden Foundation has to offer at its sale.

"We're getting a reputation for selling good plants at reasonable prices," Mrs. Peters said. The demand was so high for deciduous fruit trees especially well adapted for the mild coastal climate, she added, that next year the Foundation will probably carry even more of them.

Another factor in the success story is the effort expended by members of the Foundation. This year Shirley (Mrs. William) Bradley mobilized all the volunteers who staffed the sales booths while Lillian (Mrs. George) Bynam headed the preview party committee.

LuAnn B. Munns



Carol Overturf

daughter, Ann, arrived in the Los Angeles area. Because she wasn't sure how long they would be living in California she didn't get involved in Las Voluntarias at that time.

"But the same day we bought our house in San Marino I went over and joined the volunteers," she said. That was in 1975.

Mrs. Overturf was first drawn to the Arboretum not by a love for gardening but out of necessity. "I'm a fifth-generation New Mexican who suddenly inherited this huge Southern California yard full of plants I'd never seen before in my life. So I started by taking the home gardening and plant identification classes at the Arboretum. When they offered the craft class I took



Stan Oleson

Cindy (Mrs. Richard) Peters, chairman of the Fiesta de Flores at South Coast Botanic Garden, welcomed guests during the preview party May 15.



PLANT COLLECTION

By Ronald B. Call

THE GARDENS at the Virginia Robinson estate can be described as lavish. The front entrance area is pleasantly landscaped, but it offers no hint of the glorious expanse of gardens in store after one steps through the house and out into the heart of the gardens.

Immediately behind the house is a carefully manicured lawn area. Used chiefly for entertaining, this garden area imparts a feeling of formality as one gazes out on the rows of Italian cypress, roses, and white stucco walls. Dividing the lawn and pool area are several magnificent old oleander specimens trained as rustic trees with twisted and gnarled trunks.

Formal rose beds around the guest house and informal groupings in the rest of the garden make it clear that roses were one of Mrs. Robinson's favorite flowers. Plantings of classic roses are tucked into sunny pockets throughout the garden.

The glowing colors of bouganvillea vines dominate the walls surrounding the tennis court east of the guest house pavilion, and a superb example of violet trumpet vine (*Clytostoma callistegioides*) cascades over a nearby wall.

The house and its surrounding gardens are situated on the crest of a small hill with the two major garden areas sloping off to the northeast and southwest of the house.



A grove of palms shades stairs leading to one of nine terraces built into the hillside at the Virginia Robinson Gardens.



Judith L. Nagby

Aerial roots like these rarely form on *Ficus macrophylla* in Southern California.

Enticing pathways lead guests out into the rest of the gardens, stopping occasionally at intimate little terraces built into the hillside. Each terrace has a different atmosphere about it. Some are secluded in dense shade while others bask in the warmth of the sunshine. A pause on one of these terraces affords a beautiful view of the expanse spread below and above the terrace. Several have fountains and pools connected by a series of waterways that begin with the topmost terrace and cascade down to end in a pool on the bottom patio several hundred feet below. In many places the meandering paths become brick and stone stairways leading from terrace to terrace.

Geographically, the northeastern and southwestern slopes have distinctly different plant materials. As one proceeds to the north garden, the main plants are beautiful speci-

mens of palms — quite literally a jungle of palms. Mrs. Robinson originally wanted a typical California garden and planted olive trees, pomegranates, and persimmons in this area. These survived for awhile, but within ten years all had died because they needed a hotter, drier climate. Charles Gibbs Adams, the landscape architect who designed many important Southern California gardens in the '30's and '40's, encouraged her to collect tropical plants and helped her get many plants from the government.

Mrs. Robinson was an avid gardener and was always on the lookout for new and untried materials. As a result, she kept records as to the source of all the plants that became a part of her garden. Many of the mature specimens that are now common in the landscape could possibly have had their beginning in the garden she started in 1913.

In her horticultural experiments she found that tropical palms were ideally suited for use in her garden. The dozens of kentia palms (*Howeia forsteriana*) growing in the garden are descendents of the first ones she planted and large groves of graceful king palms (*Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*) contain beautiful specimens up to 50 feet tall. The king palms naturalized so well that the ground is carpeted with thousands of seedlings pushing up through the damp soil. The king palm is only one of the many palms found in the estate garden where lovely clumps of *Rhapis* blend with representatives of *Washingtonia*, *Chamaedorea*, *Arecastrum* and others.

Growing on the ground in the cool shade of the palms are numerous clivias and ferns. In the spring the clivias blaze with brilliant orange flowers followed in summer with fleshy red seeds. The gardens sloping away to the southwest from the mansion are lush with flowering trees and shrubs that thrive in the



LuAnn B. Munns

A moderate climate promotes the lush growth behind author (left) and Sandra Snider, Department historian.



LuAnn B. Munns

Classic roses like these beside the pavilion were among Mrs. Robinson's favorite flowers.



LuAnn B. Munns

Neptune presides over a shaded terrace.



LuAnn B. Munns

Brick stairs descend to a sunny terrace surrounded by roses at the bottom of the garden.

drier atmosphere there. No single theme permeates this area (except for the ever-present rose); instead small areas are concentrated with delightful flowers. Azaleas and camellias are present in abundance, growing in the shade of mature ficus and coral trees planted many years before. Again, many terraces are built into the gentle slope. One especially inviting terrace might be called the "fragrance terrace" for the small grove of citrus trees interspersed with several specimens of gardenias that enclose it.

Along the western slope look for a 40-foot Montezuma cypress (*Taxodium mucronatum*) as it displays its lacy, green, weeping habit.

At each turn of the path there is something new and different to surprise and delight the visitor. It would take many visits to these lovely gardens to discover everything there is to see. Clearly, the gardens were designed to entice the visitor into returning often and lingering in the splendor of Mother Nature's beauty.

Ronald B. Call is Arboretum youth education specialist.



LuAnn B. Munns

King palms (Archontophoenix cunninghamiana) grow up to 40 feet tall in the mild climate of Beverly Hills.

LOS ANGELES STATE AND COUNTY ARBORETUM, Arcadia

SEPTEMBER 12, 13—9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Cactus and Succulent Show
San Gabriel Valley Cactus and Succulent Society**

SEPTEMBER 18—5:30 to 10 p.m.

Queen Anne Frolic*
Invitation only

SEPTEMBER 26, 27—

10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Bonsai Show
Akebono Bonsai Society**

OCTOBER 31, NOVEMBER 1—

9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Novice Bonsai Show
Santa Anita Bonsai Society

NOVEMBER 14, 15—9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

"Living Jewels" Koi Show
Ikeru Hoseki Koi Club**

*Sponsored by California Arboretum Foundation

**Cosponsored by California Arboretum Foundation

DESCANSO GARDENS, La Canada

OCTOBER 17, 18—9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Plant Sale
Descanso Gardens Guild*

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER, OCTOBER, NOVEMBER
1981

OCTOBER 31, NOVEMBER 1—

9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Chrysanthemum Show
Glendale Chrysanthemum Society**

*Sponsored by Descanso Gardens Guild
**Cosponsored by Descanso Gardens Guild

SOUTH COAST BOTANIC

GARDEN, Palos Verdes Peninsula

SEPTEMBER 13—2 p.m.

Preview of Contents of Fall Classes*
Demonstrations and pre-registration

SEPTEMBER 20—2 p.m.

Flower Arrangement*
Dorothy Barns

SEPTEMBER 27—2 p.m.

Winter Vegetables in Containers*
Bob Rosebrock

OCTOBER 4—9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

"Know Your Garden Day"
South Coast Botanic Garden Foundation*

OCTOBER 11—2 p.m.

Use of Succulents in the Garden and Patio*

OCTOBER 18—2 p.m.

Birds in your Backyard*
Jess Morton, Palos Verdes Audubon Society

OCTOBER 24, 25—

10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Bonsai Show
South Coast Bonsai Association**

NOVEMBER 1—2 p.m.

Landfills, Gardens and Land Reclamation*
Slides and lecture by Steve Maguin

NOVEMBER 8—2 p.m.

Replanting Trees*
Andy Lipkis, Tree People

NOVEMBER 15—2 p.m.

Wreaths for Christmas*
Susan Seamans

NOVEMBER 29, 2 p.m.

Perennials*
Nancy Dick

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